

# **BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA 2020 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT**

## **Executive Summary**

The constitutions of Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) and each of the country's two entities – the Federation of BiH (the Federation) and Republika Srpska (RS) – provide for freedom of religious thought and practice, prohibit religious discrimination, and allow registered religious organizations to operate freely. The Federation constitution declares religion to be “a vital national interest” of the constituent peoples. The RS constitution establishes the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC) as “the Church of the Serb people and other people of Orthodox religion.” The BiH constitution reserves all positions in the Presidency and one house of parliament and certain other government offices to members of the three major ethnic groups – Serbs, Croats, and Bosniaks – who are predominantly SOC, Roman Catholic, and Muslim, respectively. The government again failed to comply with a European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) decision calling on it to open these positions to other minorities. By law, no Muslim group may register or open a mosque without the approval of the Islamic Community (IC). The human rights ministry made little progress implementing instructions making it responsible for coordinating actions to correct religious freedom abuses and to draft proposals to regulate retirement and health insurance benefits of religious workers. The Presidency again failed to approve a previously negotiated agreement that would provide religious accommodations to Muslim workers. Religious groups, in communities where they are a minority, reported authorities at all levels continued to discriminate against them in providing services and granting building permits. UNICEF reported students and teachers continued to experience ethnic and religious discrimination in schools. The Interreligious Council (IRC), comprising representatives of the country's four major religious communities, again reported inadequate investigation and prosecution of religiously motivated crimes.

The IRC registered 14 reported acts of vandalism against religious sites, including one involving a shooting at a cross, but said the number of actual incidents was likely much higher. In October, vandals damaged the Sultan Sulaiman Atiq Mosque in Bijeljina, a designated national monument. The Saint Sava Orthodox church in Blazuj near Sarajevo was repeatedly vandalized, and several Catholic memorials and chapels were also vandalized. In 2019, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) mission to the country monitored 16 potential bias-motivated incidents targeting Muslims and 15 such incidents

targeting Christians (both Catholic and Orthodox), all of which were reported to the police. The incidents ranged from threatening religious leaders and disturbing religious ceremonies with threats to vandalizing cemeteries and other religious sites. In contrast with the previous year, the OSCE did not report any anti-Semitic incidents. Slightly more than two-thirds of respondents in an August survey expressed support for maintaining religious education in schools.

U.S. embassy representatives emphasized the need to promote respect for religious diversity and enforce equal treatment for religious minorities to government officials. In May, the Ambassador met with the newly appointed Minister for Human Rights and Refugees and discussed the importance of religious freedom and the government's financial support to the IRC. In regular meetings with religious groups, embassy officials continued to urge the groups to improve interreligious dialogue to help develop a peaceful and stable society. The embassy continued to maintain regular contact with the IRC and to fund some of its interfaith and reconciliation-themed activities.

## **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 3.8 million (midyear 2020 estimate). According to the most recent census, conducted in 2013, Sunni Muslims constitute approximately 51 percent of the population, Serbian Orthodox Christians 31 percent, Roman Catholics 15 percent, and others, including Protestants and Jews, 3 percent.

There is a strong correlation between ethnicity and religion: Bosnian Serbs affiliate primarily with the SOC, and Bosnian Croats with the Roman Catholic Church. Bosniaks are predominantly Muslim. The Jewish community estimates it has 1,000 members, with the majority living in Sarajevo. The majority of Serbian Orthodox live in the RS, and most Muslims and Catholics in the Federation. Protestant and most other small religious communities have their largest memberships in Sarajevo and Banja Luka.

## **Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom**

### **Legal Framework**

Annex IV of the Dayton Peace Agreement, which serves as the country's constitution, provides for freedom of thought, conscience, and religion. It stipulates no one shall be deprived of citizenship on grounds of religion and all

persons shall enjoy the same rights and freedoms without discrimination as to religion.

The entity constitution of the Federation states all individuals shall have freedom of religion, including of public and private worship, and freedom from discrimination based on religion or creed. It defines religion as a vital national interest of the constituent peoples.

The entity constitution of the RS establishes the SOC as “the Church of the Serb people and other people of Orthodox religion.” It provides for equal freedoms, rights, and duties for all citizens irrespective of religion and prohibits any incitement to religious hatred or intolerance. It specifies religious communities shall be equal before the law and free to manage their religious affairs and hold religious services, open religious schools and conduct religious education in all schools, engage in commercial activities, receive gifts, and establish and manage legacies in accordance with the law.

The laws of Brcko, a self-governing district, do not encompass freedom of religion. Instead, national laws on religious freedom are applied.

A national law on religion provides for freedom of conscience and grants legal status to “churches and religious communities.” To acquire official status as recognized religious communities, religious groups must register. The constitutions of BiH, the Federation, and RS state that registered religious organizations are allowed to operate freely. Simplified registration procedures applied to religious groups recognized prior to adoption of the law, primarily the Orthodox Church, IC, Jewish Community, Catholic Church, and other Christian groups, including the Evangelical, Baptist, and Seventh-day Adventist Churches, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and Jehovah’s Witnesses.

Unregistered religious groups may assemble to practice their religion, but they have no legal status and may not represent themselves as a religious community.

Registration affords numerous rights to religious communities that are not available to those that do not register, including the right to conduct collaborative actions such as do charity work, raise funds, and construct and occupy places of worship. The law states churches and religious communities serve as representative institutions and organizations of believers, founded in accordance with their own regulations, teachings, beliefs, traditions, and practices. The law recognizes the legal status of four “traditional” religious communities: the IC,

SOC, Catholic Church, and Jewish community. The Ministry of Justice (MOJ) maintains a unified register of all religious communities, and the Ministry of Human Rights and Refugees (MHRR) is responsible for documenting violations of religious freedom.

According to law, any group of 300 or more adult citizens may apply to register a new religious community or church through a written application to the MOJ. Requirements for registration include presenting statutes that define the method of religious practice and a petition for establishment with the signatures of at least 30 founders. The ministry must issue a decision within 30 days of receipt of the application. The law stipulates the ministry may deny the application for registration if it concludes the content and manner of worship may be “contrary to legal order, public morale, or is damaging to the life and health or other rights and freedoms of believers and citizens.” A group may appeal a negative decision to the BiH Council of Ministers. The law allows registered religious communities to establish their own suborganizations, which may operate without restriction.

The law states no new church or religious community may be founded bearing the same or similar name as an existing church or religious community. The law also states no one may use the symbols, insignia, or attributes of a church or a religious community without its consent.

In addition to registered churches and religious communities, there are educational, charitable, and other institutions, known as “legal subjects,” that belong to these communities but are registered as separate legal entities in the MOJ registry. The IC has 120 legal subjects, the Catholic Church 398, the Orthodox Church 526, and other churches and religious communities and alliances (primarily of Protestant groups) of these communities have 47.

A concordat between the BiH government and the Holy See recognizes the public juridical personality of the Catholic Church and grants a number of rights, including to establish educational and charitable institutions and carry out religious education in public or private schools, and it officially recognizes Catholic holidays. The government and the Catholic Church created a commission to implement the concordat. A similar agreement exists between the BiH government and the SOC, and a commission to implement it was created in September.

The state recognizes the IC as the sole supreme institutional religious authority for all Muslims in the country, including immigrants and refugees, as well as for Bosniaks and other Muslim nationals living outside the country who accept the

IC's authority. According to the law, no Islamic group may register with the MOJ or open a mosque without the permission of the IC.

The law on religion states that churches and religious communities are obligated to pay taxes and contributions on earnings of their employees (pension, health, and disability insurance). In the Federation, two of 10 cantons – Western Herzegovina Canton and Herzegovina-Neretva Canton – include religious officials in their health insurance system. Sarajevo Canton does not include religious workers in its health insurance system but offers such insurance to religious officials under more favorable provisions than those available to average citizens. The RS provides pension benefits and disability insurance to religious workers while they have residence in the RS.

All three BiH administrative units have hate crimes regulated within their criminal codes. The provisions in these codes regulate hate crimes as every criminal act committed because of the race, skin color, religious belief, national or ethnic origin, language, disability, gender, sexual orientation, or gender identity of the victim. The criminal codes also stipulate that this motivation is to be taken as an aggravating circumstance of any criminal act unless the code itself stipulates harsher punishments for qualified forms of criminal acts.

The laws of the Federation and RS, as well as those of all 10 cantons, affirm the right of every citizen to religious education. The laws allow a representative of each of the officially registered religious communities to assume responsibility for teaching religious studies in public and private preschools, primary and secondary schools, and universities if there is sufficient demand. Children from groups that are a minority in a school are entitled to religious education only when there are 18 or more students from that religious group in one class. Religious communities select and train their respective religious education teachers, who are employees of the schools where they teach, although they receive accreditation from the religious body governing the curriculum.

The IC, SOC, and Catholic Church develop and approve religious curricula across the country. Public schools offer religious education in a school's majority religion, with some exceptions.

In the Federation's five Bosniak-majority cantons, primary and secondary schools offer Islamic religious instruction as a twice-weekly course, or students may take a course in ethics. In cantons with Croat majorities, Croat students in primary and secondary schools may attend an elective Catholic religion course twice a week or

take a course in ethics. In the five primary and 10 secondary Catholic schools spread throughout the Federation and the RS that do not have Croat majorities, parents may choose either an elective Catholic religion course or a course in ethics. The Sarajevo Canton Ministry of Education offers Orthodox and Protestant religious education in addition to classes offered to the Muslim and Catholic communities. The RS Ministry of Education offers elective religious education in secondary schools.

The BiH constitution provides for representation of the three major ethnic groups – Serbs, Croats, and Bosniaks – in the government and armed forces. The constitution makes no explicit mention of representation for religious groups, although each ethnicity mentioned by the constitution is associated with a particular religion.

The BiH constitution reserves all positions in the House of Peoples (one of two houses of parliament) and apportions other government offices to members of the three major ethnic groups according to quotas. Members of religious minorities are constitutionally ineligible to hold a seat in the House of Peoples. The three-member presidency must consist of one Bosniak, one Croat, and one Serb.

A law against discrimination prohibits exclusion, limitation, or preferential treatment of individuals based specifically on religion in employment and the provision of social services in both the government and private sectors.

The country has no law on restitution that would allow for the return of, or compensation for, property, including property owned by religious groups, nationalized or expropriated under communist rule.

The country is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

## **Government Practices**

The human rights ministry made little progress in implementing 2019 instructions for implementation of the national religious freedom law. In accordance with the instructions, the ministry is responsible for coordinating actions to correct religious freedom abuses and to draft proposals to regulate retirement and health insurance benefits of religious workers. The MHRR took no steps to draft proposals for resolving the issues of rights to pension, disability allowance, and health insurance for religious officials, despite issuing instructions in 2019 stating it would do so and submit the proposals to the government for approval. National, Federation,

and RS governments had still not made provisions for religious officials to fully qualify for pensions and health and disability insurance, more than 16 years after the adoption of the law on religious freedom and the 2019 issuance of instructions on implementation of the law stating the MHRR should work with religious group representatives to resolve the issue.

The government again failed to comply with a 2009 decision by the ECHR stating the country should amend its constitution to allow members of minority groups, including Jews, to run for president and the House of Peoples.

The MOJ said it generally processed registration applications by religious groups within a week. There were no reports the ministry denied any registration applications by religious communities.

The Presidency again failed to reach a consensus on the approval of a 2015 agreement between the state and the IC that addressed dietary restrictions in public institutions, employer accommodations for daily prayer, and time off to attend Friday prayers, as well as one-time travel to Mecca for the Hajj. The Presidency did not inform the MHRR what part of the agreement was not acceptable to it.

In September, the IRC reported the government prohibition against employees of judicial institutions wearing any form of “religious insignia,” including headscarves, at work, remained in place. While there were no instances of the High Judicial and Prosecutorial Council applying the prohibition during the year, an IC representative stated its existence caused uneasiness and uncertainty among Muslims working in or visiting these institutions.

According to officials of religious groups constituting a local minority, authorities at all levels continued to discriminate against those groups with regard to the use of religious property and issuance of permits to build new, or repair existing, religious properties. On March 3, three years after the original application, Drvar municipal authorities issued a location permit to the Catholic Saint Joseph Parish in Drvar for the construction of a pastoral and charity center on property owned by the Catholic Church. In 2019, the Livno Canton Ministry of Construction, Space Planning, and Environment ordered Drvar Municipality to issue a location permit to the Catholic Church in Drvar for the construction of the center, overturning the municipality’s initial rejection of the Church’s request.

As of September, the government of BiH had only partially implemented an ECHR ruling ordering it to remove a Serbian Orthodox church the court found was

illegally built on plaintiff Fata Orlovic's property in Bratunac. The lawyer representing Orlovic confirmed the RS government paid Orlovic and her relatives for financial damages. At the end of February, SOC officials removed all religious items from the church, and, for the first time, there was no church liturgy held on the church's patron saint's day on September 11. At year's end, the church building remained in place on Orlovic's property.

Leaders of the four traditional religious communities in BiH continued to say the country's continuing lack of any institution responsible for the rights of religious communities and the lack of a law on restitution – for both religious communities and private citizens – hindered efforts on the part of religious communities to resolve the issue of property confiscated and nationalized under communist rule from 1946 to 1965. Jakob Finci, the president of the country's Jewish Community, repeatedly said the country was the only one in the region that had done nothing to resolve the restitution problem. He said the lack of resolution posed a burden on religious communities, as disputed properties could be an important and much-needed source of revenue for them.

According to religious community leaders, political disagreement over whether the state or the country's two entities – the Federation and RS – had competency over restitution, as well as the potential cost, were the main barriers to the country's adopting a law on restitution. According to a study done by the Economic Institute of the Faculty of Economics, University of Sarajevo, just under 7 percent of the total nationalized property in the country belonged to religious communities, and each major religious group had unresolved restitution claims involving high-profile properties. For example, the SOC sought return of its former seminary building, which housed the University of Sarajevo's Faculty of Economics; the Jewish Community was seeking return of its La Benevolencija building in the center of Sarajevo, which housed the Ministry of Interior of Sarajevo Canton; the Catholic Church was seeking return of its Saint Augustine Institute building in Sarajevo, which housed the Music Academy; and the IC had a claim on the Palata Gazihusrevbeg building in downtown Sarajevo. In some cases, municipal, cantonal, and entity governments engaged in "silent restitution," where they allowed religious communities to use a property but did not transfer legal ownership. All main religious groups expressed concerns regarding discrimination and unequal treatment of religious communities by the Federation and the RS. All major religious groups in the country said they agreed on the urgent need for a restitution law to be adopted.



In welcoming remarks during a Christmas reception on January 16, SOC Metropolitan Hrizostom called on the BiH Presidency to support, and the BiH Parliament to adopt, a law on restitution of property. He stated that, by failing to return seized properties to churches and religious communities, the government continued to violate basic human and religious rights of believers. On September 17, Catholic Cardinal Vinko Puljic, in a meeting with High Representative Valentin Inzko, the official responsible for overseeing implementation of civilian aspects of the Dayton Peace Agreement, said the government should either return all nationalized properties to religious groups or pay them compensation. In its October report, *Key Findings of the Opinion on Bosnia and Herzegovina's EU Membership Application and Analytical Report*, the European Commission criticized BiH authorities for failure to adopt a legislative framework for handling restitution cases.

At the end of 2019, the Municipality of Stari Grad Sarajevo began construction of a 5,800 square-meter (62,000 square-foot) building in the center of Sarajevo on a plot of land, ownership of which was partly claimed by four Jewish families and partly by the IC. The Stari Grad Municipality registered itself as the owner of the land, even though the Jewish Community informed the municipality that one of the four original Jewish owners was still alive and the remaining three had living heirs. The families and Jewish Community submitted an appeal to the municipality in 2018, but the municipality rejected it in 2019 and issued a building permit to itself and private investor Amko Komerc. Unlike the Jewish families, several online media outlets, including *tacno.net* and *klix.ba*, reported that the IC was compensated for its share of the property.

According to a UNICEF report issued in March, students and teachers continued to experience ethnic and religious segregation, intolerance, and division in a number of ethnically homogenous schools throughout the country, especially in the “two schools under one roof,” where children were segregated from each other based on ethnicity.

Returnee students (those belonging to a minority ethnic group returning to their homes after being displaced by the war) continued to face barriers in exercising their rights to language education. For the seventh consecutive year, parents of Bosniak children in returnee communities throughout the RS continued to boycott public schools in favor of sending their children to alternative schooling financed and organized by the Federation of BiH Ministry of Education with support from the governments of the Sarajevo and the Zenica-Doboj Cantons and the IC. According to media and international organizations, the boycott was based on the

refusal of the RS Ministry of Education and Culture (RS MoEC) to approve a group of national subjects (specific courses to which Bosniak, Serb, and Croat students are entitled and taught in their constituent language according to their ethnicity). Parents of one of these schools in Vrbanjci, Kotor Varos, won a court case in December 2019 in which the RS Supreme Court ruled they were entitled to the national group of subjects in the Bosnian language. The RS MoEC, however, failed to implement the decision by the beginning of the new school year in September. As a result, 60 children continued learning in the Hanifici Islamic Center building, with teachers traveling from Zenica-Doboj Canton, approximately 80 kilometers (48 miles) away. In June, lawyers representing Bosniak parents filed a request for execution of the RS Supreme Court decision at the Kotor Varos Basic Court. By year's end, that court had not responded. Lawyers representing the parents also reported that they had tried to meet with the RS MoEC officials twice, but without success.

According to nongovernmental organizations and media reports, parents often chose to send their children to public school religious education classes to avoid having their children stand out from other children who attend the classes and be exposed to peer pressure. In August, the PRIME Communications agency asked 1,500 persons whether religious education should remain in schools in the country; 52.8 percent of respondents opposed removing religious education from schools; 16 percent were largely against removal; 11.5 percent favored removal; and the remainder did not answer the question.

According to Bosniak Muslim, Croat Catholic, and Serb Orthodox religious communities, authorities continued to enforce selectively the rights of religious groups regarding access to education, employment, health care, and other social services in areas where those groups constituted religious minorities. They said refugees returning to their original communities pursuant to the Dayton Peace Agreement were particularly subject to discrimination. Bosniak returnees again complained that schools in the RS celebrated Saint Sava Day as an official holiday for their schools; Bosniaks said they considered this discriminatory, since Saint Sava is an Orthodox saint.

Representatives of religious minority communities throughout the country reported that their members had difficulties accessing government services and protections, including access to health care, pensions, other social benefits, and the transfer of student records between districts. For example, in July, Cardinal Puljic told an Italian Catholic media outlet that thousands of Catholics left the country every year because of discrimination.

On several occasions, IRC leaders again said local authorities throughout the country continued to discriminate in providing police protection and investigating threats of violence and harassment, and vandalism. While only a few cases were recorded, the IRC said law enforcement officials treated the cases as simple theft or vandalism, without taking into consideration the acts occurred at religious sites and could be categorized as hate crimes. According to the IRC, the officials rarely investigated the motives of the acts, which would help distinguish cases of theft from hate crimes. In many instances, IRC leaders said they hesitated to report incidents to the police or media, particularly in areas where their religious group is a minority, fearing that public attention could result in retaliation and greater problems for their community in the future.

The Sarajevo Canton Assembly again failed to implement its 2018 decision to change the name of an elementary school and street in the town of Dobrosevici in the canton's Municipality of Novi Grad named after Mustafa Busuladzic. Busuladzic was a World War II-era Ustasha figure who glorified Hitler and was known for his anti-Semitism. Both the school and street retained the Busuladzic name.

According to representatives of the Catholic Church, the joint commission for the implementation of the concordat with the Holy See had not met since 2016, and the government had not implemented the agreements reached by the commission earlier, such as legislation on observing religious holidays.

In September, the government and the SOC formed a commission to implement the agreement between the government and the SOC. According to the MHRR, the implementation of the agreement with the SOC had likely been stalled for years due to the absence of a similar agreement between the state and the IC.

The MHRR stated in September it had launched a process to unblock the process of adopting an agreement between the IC and the government.

International and local nongovernmental organizations, academics, and government agencies said each of the country's major political parties continued to align with the religion practiced by the dominant ethnic group among its membership: the largest ethnic Bosniak parties continued to align with the IC, the largest ethnic Croat parties with the Catholic Church, and the two largest ethnic Serb parties with the SOC.

### **Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom**

The IRC, which records and tracks cases of religious intolerance and hatred, recorded 17 cases of vandalism against religious buildings (six Catholic, four Muslim, and seven SOC) during the year. Police arrested suspects in only two cases and filed criminal charges against the suspects in one case. In 2018 (there was no report in 2019), the IRC said police had identified the perpetrators in five of 14 incidents; in 2017, police identified perpetrators in 45 percent of incidents. Because religion and ethnicity often are closely linked, it was difficult to categorize many actions as solely based on religious identity.

The IRC stated it believed the actual number of incidents was much higher but remained significantly underreported because members of religious groups feared that reporting them could trigger retaliation or further episodes.

In July, unknown persons fired several shots from a small-caliber weapon at a Catholic cross in Bisnje near Derventa. Authorities reported there were no victims; they failed to identify any suspects by year's end.

On October 11, unknown persons vandalized Sultan Sulaiman's Atiq Mosque in Bijeljina by breaking glass on two windows. The mosque was a designated national monument previously restored after being destroyed in the 1992-95 war. Mirnes Kovac, a columnist for Al Jazeera Balkans, tweeted: "This is just one more sign of the dramatic rise of ultranationalist forces among the Serb population in the Balkans." Mayor of Bijeljina Mico Micic condemned the incident and called for tolerance and coexistence in the municipality, as "animosities, mistrust, and instability can bring nothing good."

In July, unknown persons sprayed insulting graffiti on the Saint Sunday Orthodox Church in the village of Dobric near Siroki Brijeg. According to the IRC, the incident led to a more proactive and constructive attitude towards the SOC by local authorities in Siroki Brijeg, who agreed to help what the IRC described as the small and long-neglected Orthodox returnee community in the village by initiating a project to provide regular water supply to its residences.

In February, vandals damaged the parish house next to the Catholic Church of the Blessed Virgin Mary in Kotor Varos Municipality in the RS in February. Police arrested two suspects and initiated criminal proceedings against them, but further information on the case was unavailable at year's end.

In January, police arrested two minors after they damaged a window and the facade of the Carsijska Mosque in Kozarska Dubica. The perpetrators later visited the imam, together with their parents, and apologized to him, offering to pay for the damage. The local mayor also offered to cover the cost of repairs.

In August, on the first day of the Islamic New Year, a dead pig was found in the yard of the mosque in Bratunac. The perpetrators were not identified.

In 2019, the OSCE mission to the country monitored 16 potential bias-motivated incidents targeting Muslims and 15 such incidents targeting Christians (both Catholic and Orthodox), all of which were reported to police. Incidents ranged from disturbing religious ceremonies with threats and shootings, to threatening religious leaders, to vandalizing graveyards and religious facilities through property destruction and graffiti.

On February 26, Danijel Rajkovic from Gacko was sentenced to one year in prison for provoking ethnic, racial, and religious hatred. In 2019, Rajkovic defecated in front of the mosque in Gacko and, on several occasions, sent threatening messages to the imam in Bosanski Novi. In addition to his prison sentence, the court ordered Rajkovic to undergo psychiatric treatment.

The Council of Muftis of the IC said it was continuing efforts to persuade unregistered Islamic congregations (or *para-jamaats*), which gathered predominantly Salafist followers and operated outside the purview of the IC, to cease what they described as “unsanctioned” religious practices and officially unite with the IC. The IC reported 11 active *para-jamaats* during the year, compared with 21 in 2019 and 64 in 2016.

In May, Cardinal Puljic, the most senior Catholic prelate in the country, held a memorial Mass for the victims of Bleiburg, where Yugoslav partisans killed thousands of Nazi-allied Ustasha fighters who fled the advance of the communist forces, as well as innocent persons, including women and children. Due to COVID-19 restrictions, Cardinal Puljic could not travel to Bleiburg, Austria, for the annual commemoration. The Jewish Community, Israeli Embassy in Tirana, Albania, and SOC criticized the Cardinal’s plans to hold the commemorative Mass, which also drew sizeable but peaceful protests in the center of Sarajevo. The press reported that the Mass, which was also broadcast by a regional television station, included a prayer for all victims of World War II, and there was no mention of Ustasha leaders. Online newspaper *Crux Now* reported that in an interview with local Catholic radio station Marija, Cardinal Pujlic said he had received threats

related to the memorial Mass and that his church had prayed “for all the victims, not for Ustashas or criminals.”

The IRC organized six training sessions for youth, religious leaders, and IRC staff on usage of social media in promoting positive narratives (stories designed to promote interreligious and interethnic dialogue). The IRC continued to monitor and condemn attacks on religious leaders and buildings. It also organized “youth corners” – booths in public areas providing pamphlets and other information promoting the work and mission of the IRC – in Tuzla, Trebinje, Sarajevo, Banja Luka, and Zepce.

#### **Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement**

In May, the Ambassador met with newly appointed Minister for Human Rights and Refugees Milos Lucic and discussed the importance of religious freedom and the government’s financial support to the IRC. Embassy officials engaged with the Presidency, Ministry of Security, and MHRR and underscored the need to promote respect for religious diversity and enforce equal treatment under the law for religious minorities.

Embassy officials had numerous meetings with the Catholic, Islamic, Jewish, and Orthodox communities and community leaders. The Ambassador had individual meetings or calls with the leaders of the traditional religious communities, and embassy officials attended events hosted by the religious communities to commemorate religious holidays. Embassy officials continued to have small in-person meetings and representational events with the representatives of the Islamic, Orthodox, Catholic, and Jewish communities. At these events, embassy officials emphasized the importance of interreligious dialogue and respect for religious diversity and urged the religious communities to continue efforts to foster reconciliation and condemn intolerance and hate speech. The embassy reinforced its messages of support following the events and meetings on its social media platforms; the postings, particularly on Twitter, included calls for tolerance and the importance of interreligious dialogue and reconciliation.

A total of 160 students from all six of the country’s Islamic madrassahs and one segregated school from Busovaca participated in a U.S. government-funded two-year intensive program bringing together students of different ethnic and religious backgrounds into one mixed classroom. In participating schools, teachers used an interactive approach to language learning and challenged students to promote tolerance in their communities. The program was representative of the long-

standing partnership between the embassy, the IC, and schools throughout the country.

The embassy continued supporting the Interreligious Studies and Peacebuilding master's program, a long-term project in its fourth year of operation, implemented jointly by the Catholic Theological Faculty, Faculty of Islamic Studies (University of Sarajevo), and Orthodox Theological Faculty (University of East Sarajevo). During the year, the embassy supported the program by financing a Fulbright fellow. The program is accredited by the Universities of Sarajevo and East Sarajevo. Its goal is to bring together professionals and students across ethnic and religious backgrounds. Thirty-five students enrolled in the program since its inception; there were 12 enrollees for 2020-21.

The embassy continued to maintain regular contact with the IRC and supported its activities by providing funding. In January, the embassy approved a one-year project to help the IRC better respond to hate speech and attacks against religious sites and officials. The project involved technical assistance to the IRC to improve its strategic messaging; increase cooperation with authorities, civil society, and the media; and bolster its outreach and networks among youth. Its main objective was to minimize the potential for escalation following negative events and send messages to prevent a cycle of recrimination and violence, while strengthening interreligious dialogue as a tool for promoting empathy and preventing violence. The project focused on five communities where hate-based attacks and speech had been prevalent in recent years (Tuzla, Trebinje, Sarajevo, Banja Luka, and Zepce).

The Deputy Administrator of the U.S. Agency for International Development visited the country in February and participated in the signing ceremony for the project with the IRC leaders. During her visit, the Deputy Administrator toured holy sites of all four traditional religions with leaders of the IRC. She congratulated the members of the IRC for their efforts to set a positive example of tolerance and collaboration across faiths by engaging citizens of different ethnic and religious backgrounds.